

Message Text

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PAGE 01 ASMARA 00958 191542Z

70

ACTION AF-08

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

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R 191255Z NOV 76

FM AMCONSUL ASMARA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4236

AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA

INFO AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO

CINCUSNAVEUR LONDON

COMNAVTELCOM WASHDC

USCINCEUR VAIHINGEN

COMIDEASTFOR

NAVCOMMUNIT ASMARA

NAVCOMMSTA NEA MAKRI

CNO WASHDC

CONFIDENTIAL ASMARA 0958

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS, ET

SUBJECT: THE ANATOMY OF AN ASSASSINATION INCIDENT

REF: ASMARA 0928 (DTG 160630Z NOV 76)

1. FURTHER DETAILS HAVE BECOME AVAILABLE ON THE ASSASSINATION INCIDENT OF NOV 14 WHICH WAS REPORTED IN REFTEL. I BELIEVE THAT A FULLER PICTURE OF THIS INCIDENT, AND ITS CONSEQUENCES, REFLECTS THE SPONTANEOUS VIOLENCE WHICH IS THE BITTER HARVEST OF ALMOST TWO YEARS OF BRUTALITY AND HATRED BETWEEN ETHIOPIANS AND ERITREANS IN ASMARA.

2. THE VICTIM OF THE INSURGENT ASSASSINS WAS MERESA TESFAI, A CIVILIAN MEMBER OF THE "JOINT COMMAND", THE BLUNT INSTRUMENT OF CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 ASMARA 00958 191542Z

THE EPMG'S SECURITY FORCES IN ASMARA. HE IS SAID TO HAVE BEEN BORN

IN ERITREA, BUT THAT HIS FAMILY WAS ORIGINALLY FROM TIGRE. IT IS ALLEGED BY INSURGENT SYMPATHIZERS THAT HE HAD PERSONALLY MURDERED SOME 90 ERITREAN YOUTHS DURING THE INTENSE CYCLE OF ASSASSINATIONS AND REPRISALS DURING JULY-OCTOBER 1975. THE FACT THAT MERESA STILL WALKED THE STREETS OF ASMARA OVER A YEAR AFTER HIS CRIMES WAS BECOMING A PROFOUND EMBARRASSMENT TO THE INSURGENTS, PARTICULARLY AS THEIR SUPPORTERS IN ASMARA HAD LONG BEEN CLAMORING FOR HIS EXECUTION.

3. MERESA WAS KNOWN TO BE WELL AWARE THAT HE WAS BEING STALKED BY ASSASSINS AND ALTHOUGH FATALISTIC IN HIS DISCUSSION OF THE THREATS, IN ADDITION TO HIS PERSONAL UZI SUBMACHINEGUN, HE REPORTEDLY HAD AS MANY AS TEN BODYGUARDS FLANKING HIM WHENEVER HE VENTURED FROM HIS QUARTERS. ERITREAN ASSASSINS HAD BEEN PLOTTING HIS DEATH FOR MANY MONTHS, BUT COULD NEVER FIND A TIME OR PLACE TO GUN HIM DOWN THAT WOULD NOT ENTAIL NUMEROUS CIVILIAN CASUALTIES. EVENTUALLY THEY LEARNED THAT ALMOST EVERY SUNDAY HE ATTENDED THE PENTACOSTAL CHURCH IN THE CENTRAL AREA OF ASMARA, AND, AS HIS MANY BODYGUARDS WOULD BE TOO CONSPICUOUS IN THE SMALL CONGREGATION, THIS SEEMED AN IDEAL VENUE.

4. ON THE MORNING OF NOV 14, TWO ASSASSINS SLIPPED INTO THE CHURCH, SIDLED UP TO MERESA AND HIS SOLE BODYGUARD AND SHOT THEM AT CLOSE RANGE SEVERAL TIMES. AS HIS DYING ACT, MERESA DREW HIS UZI AND FIRED A BURST INTO THE CONGREGATION KILLING THE YOUNG NIECE OF THE NEW VICE ADMINISTRATOR AND WOUNDING A YOUNG MAN. THE ASSASSINS FLED UNHINDERED AND THE POLICE WERE CALLED BY OTHER BODYGUARDS OUTSIDE THE CHURCH.

5. IN THE SUBSEQUENT REACTION, MUNICIPAL POLICE ARRESTED ALL THE MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION, MILITARY SECURITY FORCES CORDONED OFF THE AREA, AND A DETAIL FROM THE JOINT COMMAND BEGAN THEIR REPRISALS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD. THE TOTAL NUMBER OF VICTIMS OF THE JOINT COMMAND IS STILL NOT KNOWN, BUT OBITUARIES OF AT LEAST TWO OF THEIR VICTIMS APPEARED IN LOCAL PAPERS. THE IRONY IS THAT THESE VICTIMS WERE KNOWN TO BE LOYAL EMPLOYEES OF THE CIVIL GOVERNMENT, ONE WITH THE FORESTRY DEPARTMENT AND THE OTHER EMPLOYED AT ITEGUE MENEN HOSPITAL. THE BODIES OF OTHER VICTIMS, PERHAPS AS MANY AS FIVE, WERE REPORTEDLY SCATTERED IN DIFFERENT SECTIONS OF ASMARA.

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PAGE 03 ASMARA 00958 191542Z

6. MANY OF THOSE ARRESTED IN THE CHURCH AND ITS ENVIRONS REMAIN IN JAIL. THEIR FAMILIES ARE NOT CERTAIN WHERE THEY ARE BEING HELD, AND MANY FEAR INCRIMINATION IF THEY PROBE TOO THOROUGHLY. THE DAY FOLLOWING, THE JOINT COMMAND ARRESTED, AT RANDOM, SEVERAL MORE YOUNG MEN; THEIR WHEREABOUTS AND WELL-BEING ARE STILL UNKNOWN, ALTHOUGH NO ADDITIONAL BODIES HAVE BEEN REPORTED. AFTER SUCH AN INCIDENT, ONE IS CONSIDERED FORTUNATE IF HE IS HELD IN POLICE CUSTODY RATHER THAN BY THE JOINT COMMAND, AS THE MORTALITY RATE

OF THE LATTER'S DETAINEES IS DISPROPORTIONATELY HIGH.

7. THE EVENTUAL OUTCOME OF THIS INCIDENT MAY NOT BE KNOWN FOR MANY WEEKS, OR PERHAPS NEVER, BUT SUCH ACTION AND REACTION BRING HOME IN THE HARSHEST TERMS, TO ETHIOPIANS AND ERITREANS ALIKE, THE EX-ISTENCE OF A VAST RESERVOIR OF BITTERNESS AND VIOLENCE BENEATH THE VENEER OF NORMALITY IN ASMARA.

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